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Voicing Teachers' Perspectives on Professional Development in Literacy Education Through Narrative Inquiry

This article explores two beginning Canadian teachers' experiences of professional development in literacy education. Differences and parallel tensions between the Canadian teachers' and my own experiences as a teacher and teacher educator in Pakistan were identified through narrative inquiry. The significance of this article is found in the expression of seven necessary conditions for successful professional development: appreciation and awareness of teachers' internal quest for learning; teachers' involvement in their own professional development; promotion of active, critical reflection; sharing multiple perspectives in collective conversation; providing time for internal reflection; a democratic context for professional development; and supporting teachers' efforts to develop their professional knowledge base.

Cet article examine les expériences de développement professionnel en éducation à la littératie de deux enseignants canadiens débutants. D'une enquête narrative se dégagent des différences et des tensions parallèles entre l'expérience des enseignants canadiens et mes propres expériences en tant qu'enseignante et formatrice d'enseignants au Pakistan. L'importance de cet article réside en l'identification de sept conditions nécessaires au développement professionnel réussi : une appréciation et une reconnaissance de la quête interne des enseignants pour l'apprentissage; la promotion d'une réflexion active et critique; le partage de plusieurs perspectives lors des conversations; l'allocation d'une période pour la réflexion personnelle; un contexte démocratique; et un appui aux enseignants dans leurs efforts de développer leurs connaissances professionnelles.

Introduction

The importance of professional development for successful literacy education is recognized worldwide. In Third World countries, however, professional development programs organized by the World Bank and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are commonly undermined by the fact that they are imposed by outsiders out of touch with the local needs of teachers and students. I experienced this first hand as an elementary school teacher in Pakistan and later as a Pakistani teacher educator. It was my expectation that home-grown professional development programs in First World countries like Canada would be more successful. Acting on this perception, I interviewed two beginning Canadian literacy teachers about their professional development experiences and was surprised by their negative views. Both teachers expressed concern that their voices were not valued in professional development agendas and that their professionalism was under-

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mined by institutional bureaucracy. I present their stories here using narrative inquiry to reveal what they consider necessary conditions for effective teacher professional development. I add my own voice as a researcher to identify the connection between their experiential stories, my own experiences, and contemporary academic literature.

Background

Ongoing worldwide professional development is essential if teachers are to respond effectively to the complex and rapidly changing needs of students in contemporary classrooms. The term *professional development* recognizes teaching as a professional enterprise, that is, teaching requires a specialized education. Teachers draw on specialized knowledge to perform their duties and hold themselves accountable to the highest possible standard. Brandt (2000) describes the present-day drive for professionalism as originating in the mid-1980s, when policymakers identified the teacher as the critical factor in students' learning: the quality of students' learning depends on the quality of teaching, and the quality of teaching depends on their teachers' professional knowledge base. Knowles (1980) suggests that quality education must be "a lifelong process of continuing inquiry ... The most important skill for both children and adults is learning how to learn; the skills of self-directed inquiry" (p. 41). Professional development of teachers must, therefore, include teachers' active, inquiring voices.

Since the 1980s, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have used narrative inquiry to examine teachers' personal practical knowledge, leading to positive changes in teacher education. I believe that improvement of professional development agendas imposed by educational administrative bodies also hinges on inclusion of teachers' voices. Teaching and learning, especially in this era of globalization, are complex processes. Darling-Hammond (1993) notes, "There is little room in today's society for those who can not manage complexity, find and use resources, and continuously learn new technologies, approaches, and occupations" (p. 761). Darling-Hammond's comments point to the ever-changing, complex, and multilayered world in which present-day teachers and their students are situated. In such a context it would seem unfathomable that professional development could take the form of prepackaged products or training sessions to be dispensed to teachers who were passive recipients. Teachers are necessarily active participants in their own professional development. I engaged in narrative inquiry with beginning teachers not to identify particular teaching techniques, but rather conditions of practice that allow professional development initiatives to succeed.

The Process of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was chosen as a research methodology that would give voice to teachers' perspectives on their own personal and professional development. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe narrative inquiry as the structured quality of the experience to be studied, a storying process engaged in by participant and researcher. Narrative inquiry involves in-depth study of personal and pedagogical experiences and necessarily emerges from individual histories.

Anna and Jay, beginning elementary school teachers with several years of teaching experience in public school systems in Manitoba, provided narratives for this study. At the time of the interviews, both Anna and Jay (pseudonyms are used throughout) were enrolled in graduate studies in literacy education, with the goal of advancing their own professional development. Literacy teachers were recruited to facilitate comparisons between their narratives and my own experiences as a literacy educator. Interviews were conducted in a friendly environment to encourage honest and open responses to questions such as "What are your experiences of professional development in literacy education?" Narratives were constructed from several audiotaped and transcribed interviews with each participant. Follow-up interviews, or a member check, allowed Anna and Jay to review and clarify their narratives.

By creating first-person narratives with Anna and Jay, I hoped to reveal a fuller, more textured sense of their experiences than would be possible in expository text told from my perspective as a researcher. I probed their backgrounds, beliefs, attitudes, and practices (Creswell, 1994), attempting to understand and critically analyze how Anna and Jay interpreted the meaning of their experiences, following the narrative inquiry method put forward by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). During the interviews, I positioned myself as a co-learner, trying to gain insight from my study participants' experiences in education. As Dewey (1938) asserted, "the aim of education is growth" (p. 13) through experience.

*Teachers' Voices: Necessary Conditions for Successful
Professional Development in Literacy Education*

Anna's and Jay's professional development narratives revealed seven conditions that they believed were necessary for their professional development as teachers in literacy education.

Appreciation and awareness of an internal quest for learning

One of the first ideas the teachers brought into the conversations was the importance of becoming knowledgeable. Both Anna and Jay suggested that teachers' own consciousness of their desire to learn empowers their ability to become "professional." Anna considered a *professional teacher* "someone who is knowledgeable about the area she works in." Jay said that the term *professional teacher* meant "being a learner." For these beginning teachers, this awareness was the most significant condition for their professional development in literacy education.

They expressed their appreciation for and awareness of professional learning as an internal quest. Anna said,

I don't think that teachers are allowed as much professional independence as I think they once had in Canada. The most significant thing I have done as far as my own professional development has been to return to university to work on my Master's degree. If I was doing this for the money, I would be far better off, financially speaking, buying an RRSP (Registered Retirement Savings Plan).

Jay's comments were similar to Anna's:

It was my own need to develop my voice that prompted me to return to the university for further studies. What the provincial government was telling me and what my school division was echoing seemed to contradict much of what I

believe in as a teacher and learner. I was anxious to have some other voices to think with. Reading and talking with others has led to a lot of thinking about my own professional development.

Jay questioned some of his experiences with administrators' professional development expectations in schools and wondered why his professional learning had to be validated by his administrator. He asked, "What would this say about what it means to be a professional?"

Teachers' involvement in their own professional development in literacy education

A key frustration that both Anna and Jay expressed with professional development in literacy education was that it did not create a space for them to be involved. Anna criticized that planning was "left up to the school administration or to the school division to decide." Anna and Jay were deeply concerned that teachers' voices and questions were often silenced in professional development agenda-making. Jay explained:

Voice is an issue that is important to me. As a teacher, I don't think my job is to just fit into a fixed system. Not only do individual teachers need to be questioning their own classroom practices, but, collectively, as a school staff, we also need to be thinking about what is going on at the whole school level. The whole school community needs to be talking about what we value. And, I don't just mean that we need to speak up. I also mean that we need to put our beliefs into action.

Similarly, Anna related that not all teachers' voices, beginning and experienced, were represented in the professional development agenda of her school system:

In Manitoba, with the flurry of new curriculum guides being passed down to us from the Department of Education and Training, there is less and less autonomy. There is certainly less and less decision-making to be done by individual teachers about what they teach the children in their classrooms.

Active, critical reflection

Both beginning teachers indicated that active, critical reflection was important to their professional development. Jay said that his professional understandings came principally from reading and talking with others, from observing the children in his classroom, and from reflecting on how his practices supported or interfered with children's learning. Anna's comments agreed with Jay's: "I enjoy being involved in ongoing research in my own classroom." Anna and Jay put forward the idea that critical personal reflection could be a way of entering the conversation about literacy education and professional development.

Sharing multiple perspectives in collective conversations

Anna said, "My school division sometimes plans a program for us for a few days a year, but I have never learned much from these sessions." She elaborated,

I think professional development needs to be planned more locally, at the school level. We have a new principal at my school this year. He's set up some committees within the school to look at the big picture, of where we are headed as a school, so that we can do more long-range professional development planning.

Obviously Anna felt that a lack of opportunity to share multiple perspectives among teachers and administrators impeded her professional development. Complementarily, Jay said that one of the most important aspects of professional development for him was the establishment of caring and respectful relationships that allowed space for dialogue:

Whether I am working with the children in my classroom, their parents, people in the local community, my colleagues, my administrators, or members of school division committees, I am seeking collaborative relationships. For me, a collaborative relationship begins with mutual respect and a desire for authentic dialogue. Even when there are disagreements between individuals there can never be a loss of respect. There are always some shared values within the differences. As a teacher, I welcome diversity rather than shunning it.

Anna and Jay both expressed that by sharing their ideas, offering constructive criticism, and participating in in-depth and long-term conversations, they were deepening their learning community's collective professional development.

Reflection from the inside

Jay realized that while reflecting on his professional development, he experienced an ongoing dialogue within himself. He clarified his reflection process, explaining,

I want to be sure that my stance is clear. I am not opposed to the province setting out general curriculum expectations. I just don't want these expectations to exclusively drive the educational agenda that I feel I should be creating with the children in our classroom. I see us as a community being involved in uncovering the curriculum together, rather than my just covering the outcomes that have been dictated to me from someone outside of the classroom. This puts me at some risk in my school division. At the moment, my school division is very much just a mouthpiece for government policies. The leadership in the division doesn't seem to want to take a stand of its own: there is just a knee-jerk reaction. The government dictates something and my division follows, without stopping to reflect on whether this is a direction in which we think we should be headed.

A democratic context

Although neither participant used the term *democratic*, both expressed that a democratic way of planning and enacting professional development activities would improve the experiences of practicing literacy teachers. Jay noted, "contradictory positions may well arise ... whether we are administrators, teachers, parents, students, etc." It is essential to have an inclusive vision of learning where every voice is heard and valued, as in a democracy. For Jay it is important to collaborate with other colleagues, with parents, and with the larger community as a way of locating a voice for himself and his students in the school and regional community. Without a democratic context, teachers are skeptical and resistant to adopting the externally imposed techniques. Anna, for example, said she was "skeptical about leaping onto new bandwagons ... without fully exploring the underlying principles of what is being advocated."

Developing a knowledge base

Developing and expanding a relevant knowledge base through both outside resources and learning through their own teaching experience is critical to

becoming a professional teacher. The knowledge that Anna acquired through resources and textual material from outside the classroom formed part of her knowledge base. However, Anna stated that to complete her knowledge base it was essential for her to have opportunities to share her own personal and practical knowledge with others.

I think there are teachers in my school who need a lot of support with understanding basic knowledge around literacy learning and teaching. Even commonplace ideas, such as conducting reading and writing workshops that have been discussed in professional books and articles for a long time now haven't found their way into many of the classrooms in my school.

Similarly, Jay said that his professional knowledge base was enhanced by both personal learning and knowledge sharing:

Whether it was literacy education I was learning more about, or professional development in any other area, I would see it being necessary for me to be directly involved in collecting and interpreting data from my own classroom, talking about this data with colleagues, and using professional readings to think about this data in new ways or with new language.

For Jay to be directly involved in this process in which a multitude of situation-specific, immediate judgments occur, means that there must be some autonomy in his professional practice. Jay added, "Meaningful practical understandings come about when I take risks, when I try out new strategies, or when I try to put an abstract idea into practice. I know that I need to risk if I am to learn. That's how professional renewal comes about." Jay's repeated use of the pronoun *I* emphasizes his involvement and autonomy in the process.

Discussion: Parallels with Educational Literature

The seven key points for successful professional development of teachers in literacy education emerged from interviews that, although in-depth, represent the views of only two people. The wisdom of these beginning teachers is revealed, however, by the resonance between their insights and the scholarly literature of professional development. Anna and Jay both defined professionalism as a dedication to knowing and learning. This parallels Merton's (1982) identification of "professional knowing" as a personal construction of a systematic body of theoretical and empirically derived knowledge. The personal character of knowledge is the necessary condition.

One of the frustrations that Anna and Jay expressed with professional development in literacy education was that it did not create a space for them to be involved: they felt that their voices were neither heard nor respected. The conviction of these beginning teachers about the importance of their own voice is supported by scholars such as Goodman (1996) who learned that the involvement of teachers in their own professional development is critical. Without such involvement there is a risk that teachers will be less committed to professional development opportunities. Similarly, Ganser (2000) argues for envisaging professional development as a constructivist activity that allows teachers' to construct their own ideas, beliefs, and practices. Corcoran (1995) also stresses the value of focusing professional development on teaching and learning as experienced directly by teachers. Without the inclusion of teachers' voices,

little of traditional professional development will result in classroom implementation (Crafton, 1994).

Both teachers also indicated that their own active critical inquiry was central to their professional development. Braunger and Lewis (1997) agree that as professionals, literacy teachers are responsible "for continuously interrogating and revising their practice based on experience and emerging knowledge" (p. 5). This is in contrast to the frequent presumption of governing bodies that teachers are primarily passive consumers of university researchers' expertise and local administrators' agendas for professional development. Young and Barnett (1998), along with Irvine (1993), indicate that teacher research and ongoing problem-posing and problem-solving do more to help teachers analyze their current practices and reshape them than perhaps any other single form of professional development. Jay's reflection on the prime importance of learning from dialogue and classroom experience to his professional development echo Young and Barnett's and Irvine's results. Teacher-driven inquiry models such as that presented by the National Council of Teachers of English (Weaver, 1998) recognize and honor the complexity of the knowledge base of teaching by inviting authentic questions and promoting systematic, self-critical reflection.

Sharing what they have learned in study groups, research dialogue groups, and team-teaching plays a central role in both Anna's and Jay's professional growth. Dialogue between and among teachers and administrators helps teachers to appreciate perspectives that are different from their own. Joyce and Showers (1997) showed that collaborative shared research relationships "break down the isolation and increase the collective strength of the community of educators who staff the school" (p. 45). Similarly, Spark and Hirsh (1997) stress the importance of bringing all members of the learning community together for decision-making to collaborative professional growth.

Anna and Jay also communicated the fact that teachers need time to reflect on their own situations in relation to what has been collaboratively learned. Self-critical reflection is difficult and demanding work; however, it plays an essential role in preserving the professional autonomy of teachers (Patterson, Snata, & Short, 1993). Jay and Anna rejected the one-size-fits-all outsiders' models of professional development arranged by their administration and government and stated their willingness to engage in collaboration, reflection, and risk-taking. Both of their narratives indicate that a democratic context will be necessary for improvements to take place in professional development in literacy education.

Dewey (1938) explained that democratic learning models required bringing conflicting ideas into the open where their special claims could be seen and appraised, discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of the ideas held separately. According to Hargreaves and Fullan (1992), we need to value multiple solitudes, multiple points of views, and multiple narratives if we are to achieve democratic ends genuinely. A democratic context for professional development in literacy education would provide opportunity for the expression of inclusive interests from individual teachers, administrators, students, parents, and communities. When all participants are not engaged in the process, for example, when an adminis-

tration adopts a new approach or technique to teaching a subject without the involvement of teachers, teachers begin to engage in active critical reflection.

Because literacy is a basic foundation for education, and reading is one of the essential components of literacy, my conversations with Anna and Jay centered on reading. The National Council of Teachers of English stated, "readers learn best when their teachers are knowledgeable about the reading process and the conditions that influence its development" (Weaver, 1998, p. 3). According to Braunger and Lewis (1997),

Teachers develop their own knowledge about reading through their own formal education, their reading and reflecting on the work of published researchers, and close observation of and reflecting on children reading in their classrooms, their sharing of classroom based insights with each other, and ongoing study of their classrooms in light of new understandings from teachers' and researchers' work. (p. 10)

In addition, Jay stressed the value of risk-taking in his quest to become a professional teacher. Spark and Hirsh (1997) explain that the teacher's desire to develop disciplinary expertise and to enhance his or her pedagogical skill is critical to professional development. Risk-taking implies that teachers have made a successful connection between their reading and observation of others' work and what they have experienced first hand (Crafton, 1994).

Researcher's Reflection

Anna's and Jay's narratives indicated the importance of seven conditions necessary for successful professional development. Underlying all of them is the importance of hearing and respecting teacher's voices and allowing time for experiential learning, critical reflection, and expression of multiple perspectives in a democratic professional structure. Since the mid-1980s, researchers in professional development have made similar suggestions to those provided by the beginning teachers in this study (Knowles, 1980). Anna's and Jay's professional association, the Manitoba Teachers' Society (1987), describes professional development as:

Formal and informal activities intended to foster the growth of educators—persons whose growth enriches their teaching and their relationship with students, as professionals whose increasing competence enables them to carry out their roles more effectively and, as staff members whose collegial relationships have an effect on the motivation and skills of others and who will be able to implement curricular and other changes. (p. 1)

It is surprising to me that an agency that recognizes the importance of teachers' involvement in professional development failed to meet Anna's and Jay's needs. Both felt that their system could do better to facilitate teachers' professional development—indeed, both took matters into their own hands and embarked on graduate studies. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to suggest a remedy for this problem, Anna's and Jay's narratives are situated in, and thus reveal, a disconnection between professional development in literacy education theory, institutional intent, and practice.

The Researcher's Narrative: An Interpretation of the Meaning of Place for Teachers in Professional Development in Literacy Education

Anna's and Jay's narratives provided me with insight into their struggles, challenges, and successes with professional development as literacy teachers in Canada. Teachers' narratives can inform initiatives to improve teaching professional development (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). My intention, however, was not to identify new professional development agendas, but to gain insight from contrasts between Canadian teachers' experiential narratives and my own narrative as a Pakistani teacher and teacher educator.

As a teacher educator from a Third World country, my expectation was that teachers in First World countries such as Canada would have autonomy and a voice in making decisions about their professional development. In Pakistan I was responsible for professional development of beginning teachers. Working with an inflexible professional development agenda imposed by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and United States' Aid Agencies, I felt cut off from professional decision-making. I was torn between what I perceived to be my students' interests and learning needs and externally prescribed curricula and standardized exams. In Pakistan teachers have little autonomy or voice.

From Anna and Jay I learned that although teachers in Canada do not have to follow international agendas, they do have to follow provincial and divisional guidelines for professional development, which do not always include their voices. In both Pakistan and Canada teachers are often regarded as passive participants in the agendas of professional development outsiders to classrooms. I had expected a more democratic and less authoritative experience for Canadian teachers.

When I reflect on the statements of the Canadian beginning teachers Anna and Jay and the literature reviewed for this study, I am struck by the lack of a defined space or *place* for teachers' voices in professional development programming. In the experiences of my culture and languages (Urdu, Arabic, Punjabi, and Siraki) the word *place* refers to an expression of attitude that is respectful and values diverse voices. This understanding of *place* is similar to Dewey's (1938) description of the method of democracy, which is bringing conflicting ideas into the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised. In English, however, the noun *place* refers merely to the position or location of an object or a person, either in space or in a sequence or hierarchy (Oxford English Dictionary, 2005). Thus for a speaker of English, a person may have a place; that is, a teacher may have a place to sit at a professional development meeting and may be given position on a committee. This definition does not always imply an opportunity for expression and inclusion of voice as it does in my other languages. As a Pakistani-Canadian, I question the meaning of *place* for beginning teachers in the agenda of professional development. It is interesting to note that the English word *place* came from the Greek *plateia* meaning "broad way" (Oxford English Dictionary). Perhaps in the past there was a connection between the many languages that have influenced my understanding, a connection that has been lost in the shared colonial experiences of English-speaking peoples. I hope that in the future, teachers' professional development will include the voices of teachers like Anna, Jay, and me,

giving us a broader place in which to engage in open-ended dialogue that will benefit our quests to become professional teachers.

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